

General Subjects Section
ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
1948 - 1949

THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY B, 504th PARACHUTE INFANTRY
(82nd AIRBORNE DIVISION) IN PIERCING THE SIEGFRIED
LINE, NEAR LOSHEIMERGRABEN, GERMANY 2-4 FEBRUARY 1945
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: PARACHUTE RIFLE COMPANY IN
A NORMAL GROUND ROLE ASSAULTING PERMANENT FORTIFICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph describes the assault operations of "B" Company, 504th Parachute Infantry of the 82nd Airborne Division in the western belt of the Siegfried Line near Losheimergraben, Germany from the second to the fourth of February 1945.

Before discussing this action in detail, it is first desired to explain to the reader what events had previously occurred in the zone of operations of the U.S. 12th Army Group, so that the story of Company B might be presented more clearly.

By the end of January 1945 the First and Third American Armies which composed the 12th Army Group had reduced Von Runstedt's famous "Bulge" to a wrinkle. (1) Everywhere in this area his battered and depleted units were stubbornly, but unsuccessfully, resisting the effort of this large Allied Force to push them back on German soil. (2)

At this period the 12th Army Group's mission was altered to conform to SHAEF's strategy of clearing all Wehrmacht units from the ground west of the Rhine in order that a tremendous final offensive to the heart of Germany might be launched in the early spring. (3) (4)

The 12th Army Group hoped to accomplish its part of this plan by directing the First Army to attack in its zone with a main effort on its south flank from the vicinity of St. Vith, Belgium. The specific purpose of this attack was to break through the Siegfried Line and capture the key heights at Blankenheim and Marmagen from which easy access to the open road network toward Bonn and Remagen on the Rhine was provided. (5) (See Map A)

(1) A-1, p. 83; (2) A-2, p. 14-15, 55; (3) A-1, p. 86; (4) A-3, p. 141; (5) A-3, p. 147.

In the selection of this particular axis of attack the 12th Army Group well realized that it would be attacking some of the most rugged defensive terrain on the Western Front. (6) However, it was hoped that a penetration could be scored through General Field Marshal Model's Fifth Panzer Army, which had been seriously weakened in the recent Ardennes Battle. (7) It was realized also that, even if a penetration should not be made, that this advance would have the additional advantage of tying up reserves which von Runstedt, the German commander, urgently needed in the north. (8)

For this attack the First Army chose its southernmost element, the XVIII Airborne Corps, and assigned to it part of the concentration of divisions which had been employed in the recapture of the St. Vith area. These specifically were the 1st, 80th, 82nd Airborne and the 84th Divisions.

The Corps jumped off in the attack toward the Siegfried Line the 28th of January on a two division front with the veteran 1st Division on the north attacking the "Hollerath Knee" (international boundary line elbow) and the All American 82nd Division striking on the south. (9)

The 82nd Airborne was given a threefold mission as follows: first, push to the northeast over the roadless Ommerscheid-Bucholz Ridge, which led from St. Vith to the Siegfried Line; second, protect the Army south flank; and third, maintain contact with the Third Army which was to assist by moving forward on the south. (10) (11) (12)

The XVIII Airborne Corps displaying the speed of execution for which it was justly famous, refused to allow logistical problems to limit its rate of advance and drove its two forward divisions ruthlessly and relentlessly to the Siegfried Line. The enemy was to be given no opportunity to marshall his reserves near these defenses. Attacks were made continuously both night and day and the enemy was overrun everywhere before he could properly stand and fight.

(6) A-2, p. 3, 17; (7) A-2, p. 4, 10; (8) A-2, p. 22; (9) A-4, p. 13; (10) A-3, p. 151; (11) A-5, Chap. "Bulge, Last Stages"; (12) Personal knowledge.

Many times he was caught in fear and disbelief that anyone would attack in weather such as this, and was killed and wounded by the scores for every American casualty. Much ground was taken and at a relatively cheap price.

However, these attacks were not made without some cost, as this monograph will later show. The operation was conducted during some of the worst weather yet seen on the Western Front, was fought under conditions of indescribable misery and difficulty, and at its end in the Siegfried Line was for the troopers of the 82nd Airborne Division one of the most bitterly fought actions of its history. (13)

THE WEST WALL

Lying directly across the zone of action of the 82nd Airborne Division was the Siegfried Line or "West Wall" as it was better known to the German peoples.

This Line was a narrow, homogeneous belt of concrete fortifications which outlined Germany's natural terrain barriers at her western border, reaching without a break from Switzerland to Holland. This fortified line had been constructed at the inception of World War II, and, though well advertised, did not merit the reputation for impregnability that it had for the average allied soldier. Its invulnerability had waned with the rapid development of better weapons. As a result penetrating it was more likely to be a triumph from the press relations standpoint than it was a feat of arms. (14)

Had correct military evaluation been made at this time, it would have been obvious that the Siegfried was far from being a modern defensive bulwark. (15) It had no defense in depth and its numerous pillboxes did not permit the use of the newer, large-caliber weapons.

The current standard for prepared defenses had been developed by the Russians during their famous last ditch stands in the east. They had developed the more recent concept of the all around "hedgehog"

(13) A-6, Sec. II, p. 9;

(14) A-3, p. 51; (15) A-2, p. 8;

style of resistance from strong points in which the principle of depth was exploited and measured in miles and in which a maximum use was made of heavy calibered weapons and reserve forces.

The Siegfried Line, however, was shallow in depth extending from only a few hundred yards at most points to an occasional several thousand yards at other points, where its makers considered the terrain to be defensively weakest. (16) Pillboxes of generally uniform construction were patterned as evenly in the line as the terrain's military capabilities required. Little attempt was made to organize ground into centers of resistance.

Still another important failing of these western defenses was the outdated design of the individual bunkers which prohibited the housing of weapons larger than either the machine gun or the 37 mm cannon. Apertures and embrasures had been standardized for these smaller weapons and their dimensions could not be enlarged to handle the heavier calibered guns now needed for defense against the well armed allies. (17)

A last, inherent weakness was caused by the limited traverse of each of the weapons. This traverse was an average fifty degrees for all installations. Fields of fire were consequently restricted and many areas of dangerous dead space further increased the assailability of the defenses.

The pillboxes, however, did have some advantages, and it may be well to enumerate them. When originally constructed the Germans had placed each pillbox so as to make the most of the terrain which it reinforced. The principles of mutual support and long open fields of fire were exercised to the optimum.

Also, four years of disuse had covered a majority of the emplacements with moss and foliage, thus rendering many of them almost observation proof. This was a most important consideration to the front line soldier who very often found them by surprise, too late. (18)

(16) A-7, p. 1; (17) A-7, p.2; (18) A-3, p. 52.

The general design of each pillbox was such as to make each unit a self sustaining entity. Each bunker had its own light and ventilating system. Living quarters and cooking facilities were provided for its crew.

Fortifications were not connected to each other by underground passageways. Communications trenches were often used for this purpose and they seldom led to avenues of retreat. The basic purpose here seemed to be to give the defenders only two alternatives; fight or be annihilated. Bunkers were connected, however, by underground cables to observation and command post pillboxes located to the rear.

Each box was rectangular in shape and had the following general dimensions: 20-30 feet wide, 40-50 feet long, and 20-25 feet high. More than half this height was underground. Boxes were often completely covered with earth except for firing embrasures. As a result many of the forts actually became a part of the terrain.

Walls and roofs were four to eight feet thick and were absolutely invulnerable to infantry weapons. However, firing ports and embrasures, both for machine weapons and personnel, provided the Achilles heel to what otherwise might have been a formidable obstacle. Even though faced in steel these openings could easily be neutralized. (19) Aggressive riflemen could move unseen and by active small arms fire force the enemy to button up his apertures. Where supporting direct fire artillery and tanks could be used against the embrasures, reduction of these positions was even further simplified.

To augment the defense of the bunkers, increased and extensive use was made of supporting trenches, fire pits, obstacles, and open emplacements. Larger caliber weapons were used in these positions with the result that often defensive operations at the line of pillboxes assumed a similarity to normal defensive action. (20) Mines and wire further increased the strength of the positions.

The German efforts at improving the line in this fashion was frank evidence that they realized that their defenses had become weak and outmoded. (19) A-2, p. 26; (20) Personal knowledge.

TERRAIN

Only not in Map A

In the zone of action of the 82nd Airborne Division the main axis of advance to the Siegfried Line had been along the Ommerscheid-Bucholz Ridge. This thickly forested and cross-compartmented hump separated the Our and ~~Ambleve~~ Rivers. It also led directly to the West Wall which lay athwart the key heights center at Neuhof. (See Map A)

These heights formed a most important promontory which dominated all terrain for many miles around. Its real importance may be better judged when it is considered that from this ground sprang the headwaters of the Kyll, Olef, Warche, and Our Rivers, all of which were or had been strong features of the German defenses in this area. (21)

Terrain not well shown on maps - many more places omitted

Also important was the fact that these heights controlled the critical Dalhemer Ridge which led east to the objective area of the First Army at Blankenheim and Marmagen.

Because of the vital nature of this terrain the Germans had fortified extensively the minor road junctions of Udenbreth, Neuhof, and Scheid. Pillboxes had been profusely constructed in these town areas where the terrain became relatively flat and open. Separating these two junctions lay the Mertestrott Heights, which is the particular zone of action concerned in this discussion. Here defenses were somewhat lighter because of the tortuous, almost impassable terrain. The enemy firmly believed that no attacker could possibly assault this area successfully.

Finally it is to be noticed that but one suitable road existed to connect Udenbreth and Scheid. This road was the most probable route for reinforcing forces to take, in the event that either one of the two towns was threatened. It must be remembered that at this period of the war the Wehrmacht could not afford to employ transport locally. (22) This factor forced the Germans to employ local reserves near points of expected attack shifting them laterally instead of swinging troops in broad arcs behind the lines over the better roads which lay deeper to the rear. Close lying lateral roads such as the Scheid-Neuhof route therefore assumed real significance.

(21) A-2, p. 12; (22) A-2, p. 4.

what is situation? where are we?

This, then, was the situation presented by the ground, and it was clearly evident that any plan of action to be followed by the 82nd Airborne Division would stem more from terrain considerations than it would from any other single factor.

PLAN OF ATTACK

On the first of February 1945 elements of the 82nd Airborne Division Reconnaissance platoon were patrolling to the Siegfried Line. This unit soon reported that there was no evidence of enemy activity in this area; and, in fact, that some of the bunkers had been entered and found empty.

This important information was forwarded from the division to higher echelon with the result that at all levels confidence waxed high that the rapidly moving American units had actually outpaced the German forces to their famous barrier. (23) How grossly inaccurate this report actually was and how false were the hopes of all concerned will soon be seen.

Formulating rapid but sound plans and taking nothing for granted, General James M. Gavin, Commanding General 82nd Airborne Division, decided to make his main effort directly through the defenses at Udenbreth and Neuhof with his 325th Glider Infantry, reinforcing that unit with all the armor and artillery available in the division. To protect the Glider Infantry's vulnerable right flank he ordered the 504th Parachute Infantry to assault the positions on the Mertestrott Heights, seize the high ground there, and cut the Scheid-Neuhof Road. (See Map B) Both units were to attack through a sister unit, the 505th Parachute Infantry, then facing the line in positions just east of Losheimer-graben.

The 504 was further directed that it would operate initially without artillery or tank support until the Udenbreth-Neuhof defenses had been secured.

(23) A-3, p. 151, 152.

*308 and 505th
not shown on map*

The 505th Parachute Infantry, when passed through, would reconstitute the division reserve. The fourth regiment of Infantry, the 508th, would improve its present positions on the south and assume responsibility for defending the First Army's flank in the Losheim-Lanzerath area. (24)

EFFECTIVENESS OF TROOPS

reference?

Upon receipt of the division plan of action the 504th Parachute Infantry was located to the south on the First Army flank actively defending newly won positions against counterattacks which steadily diminished in power as large German units outflanked by the First Army's drive were successfully withdrawn to the east.

Before discussing the scheme of movement of the regiment to the Siegfried Line and its plan of attack it would be well at this point to discuss the condition and efficiency of troops inasmuch as this particular factor, the fighting ability of the individual soldier, proved to be the most salient feature of this entire operation.

The regiment was considerably better equipped with regard to arms and ammunition than when it had first been called in December to defend against von Runstedt's thrust. However, much had been lost of the physical vigor of these traditionally fit troops as the result of this period of operations. Men were generally fatigued and underweight because of extended periods of exposure and hunger. More than sixty per cent suffered from the effects of a bloody winter dysentery complicated by the twin agents of bad water and a generally insufficient diet. This latter shortcoming was due principally to the simple fact that the caloric value of the standard ration did not meet the daily heat and energy requirements of the individual soldier, who, in the ceaseless cold, expended heat energy at a prodigious rate.

Another limiting consideration was the lack of winter clothing and gear. The 504 had no particular priority on this form of misery as this seemed to be general throughout all U.S. forces in the theater at this time.

(24) Personal knowledge; Statement 5 February 1949 of Colonel R. H. Tucker, Regimental Commander, 504th Parachute Infantry (1942-1946)

A final limiting consideration was the low effective strength of the regiment which naturally placed an extra burden on all hands who were present for duty. All units were at about fifty per cent of their authorized enlisted strength. Although many casualties had been sustained in the commissioned ranks, officer strengths were not as serious a problem because of the parachute tables of organization which normally provided two lieutenants for each rifle platoon. The regiment was at what was popularly known as "down to attacking strength". (25)

Even with these deficiencies, however, the regiment was still a formidable group of fighters. Its morale was unshakeable and its experience was broad. Few fighting teams with the same lengthy time in action had participated in as much heavy fighting under such varied conditions, and suffered as few casualties.

Consistently the unit had fought, often cut off and surrounded, in some of the most critical spots of the war; and, often outgunned by opposing artillery, had met the best troops the Germans could pit against it, surrendering not a foot of ground, defeating each in turn with an average disproportionate casualty rate of ten to twenty per cent that of the enemy. A truly remarkable record. (26)

It is established that the members of this regiment were exceptionally fine soldiers. Moreover, their conduct as brought out in the battle action that follows must not be considered unusual, but rather, typical of what actually goes on even in a veteran fighting team.

REGIMENTAL PLAN OF ATTACK

Colonel R. H. Tucker, commander of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, upon having been advised of his regiment's mission to attack the Siegfried Line immediately established assembly areas for his three battalions about two thousand yards north of Losheimergraben. He further directed that the Second Battalion be moved first, followed in separate

(25) Personal knowledge;

(26) Personal knowledge, from combat and administrative experiences of writer, who was custodian of Regimental records October 1945- May 1946. A-8, see following Chaps: "Italy History", 3rd, 5th, 6th, 8th, 9th, 10th pages; "Holland History", 3rd, 4th pages; "Belgium History", 2nd, 3rd pages; A-6, Sec. III, p. 4.

Map C showed
show - little more of the area
to include assembly area and starting

shuttles by the First and Third Battalions; and, finally, that the regiment would attack immediately upon arrival of the second shuttle carrying the First Battalion.

The mission of the Second Battalion, led by Lieutenant Colonel Edward N. Wellems, was to strike due east through the Bucholz Forest Gerolstein, enter the Siegfried Line at a bend in the Wilsam Brook, attack up the prominent ridge leading to the Jagerhauschen Farm, cut the Scheid-Neuhof Road at that point and go into the defense. (See Map C)

Major John T. Berry, commanding the First Battalion, was directed to follow through the gap to be created by the Second Battalion, swing southeast and seize the lower Mertestrott Heights, thus expanding and establishing the regimental penetration. Both units were to clear all fortifications in their respective zones of action.

The Third Battalion, which would not close in its assembly area until well after the regiment had begun its attack, was designated as the regimental reserve. Additional orders for its employment were to be given upon its arrival in the new assembly area. (27)

With these instructions the movement of the 504 to its assembly areas began. The meager total of transportation provided will give the reader a good picture of the reduced strength of the regiment at that time as well as an idea of its streamlined efficiency. To move the unit in three battalion shuttles, six 2 1/2 ton trucks, without trailers, were furnished. This number plus two weasels borrowed earlier from the division artillery, constituted the entire amount of transport available to do the job. (28) It was sufficient, however, even though the troops were crowded.

BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK

Arriving in its forward assembly shortly before dawn on the second of February, the First Battalion paused to shed rolls and draw extra

(27)(28) Personal knowledge; Statement 5 February 1949 of Colonel R. H. Tucker, Regimental Commander 504th Parachute Infantry (1942-1946)

ammunition. Grenades, armor-piercing cartridges and the reliable German Panzerfausts were issued in plenty. However, no rations were available at this time. The last Class I Issue had occurred on the 31st of January and that had been two days late. The 82nd Division limited in transportation often found itself short of rations and medical supplies, as in this case. It was seldom, however, even in the tightest of situations, that it failed to come up with an ammunition resupply. (29)

The German Panzerfaust was a tremendously more potent weapon than the U. S. bazooka, and consequently had become almost a standard item of issue in the regiment. Men were regularly trained in its use with the result that it had become a valued assault weapon.

While troops were drawing ammunition all officers were briefed on the mission. Reference was made to the reconnaissance report which buoyed spirits and hopes that the fight would be only a light action, if it was a fight at all. All concerned were also advised that no supporting fires would be available and that a resupply would not be effective until the Neuhof Road net was cleared by the 325th Glider Infantry. Casualties were to be evacuated by hand to points on the attack route which would be established as far forward as transportation would permit.

Orders for the employment of the battalion were framed tentatively. Each company was assigned a general position on the lower Mertestrott Heights which had been designated as the battalion objective. "C" Company would lead out in the tracks of the Second Battalion, turn right after entering the line and center itself on the battalion objective. "A" and "B" Companies, following in column, would then position themselves on the left and right of "C" Company respectively, thus forming a battalion perimeter on the objective. Mortars and machine guns of the Battalion Headquarters Company would remain under battalion control and be employed on opportunity. (30)

With no further delay the battalion went into the march, struggling, slipping and sliding up and down the precipitous route through the

(29) Personal knowledge; Statement 5 February 1949 of Colonel R. H. Tucker, Regimental Commander, 504th Pch. Inf. (1942-1946)

(30) Personal knowledge.

Bucholz Forst Gerolstein. Progress in many places was made on hands and knees through the snow and ice. It was obvious that supply operations, if they were to be carried on over this route, would be of meager proportions indeed.

All men were heavily burdened with ammunition and the high proportion of automatic weapons always carried by parachute units. For all individuals the constant climbing and sliding was a hardship. Some men, had they not been closely supervised, would have thrown away the extra ammunition they carried. However, leather-lunged noncommissioned officers kept up a ceaseless, vocal snarl at the end of each sub-column, preventing this, and preserving for their commanders both a rapid rate of march and essential control.

Proceeding in this fashion for some three thousand yards, word came back from the Regimental Commander, who was well forward with his lead battalion, that despite the earlier reconnaissance reports, the Siegfried Line was occupied by the enemy in force. The Second Battalion had shot its way through the first line of bunkers, suffering heavy casualties, but was now moving forward to its objective against increasing resistance. It was also seriously tied up with heavy counterattacks from the south. The 325th Glider Infantry at Neuhof to the north had stirred up a hornets nest and was fighting for its life in a pitched battle against massed armor counter thrusts. With this news the attack of the Siegfried Line changed from a cross-country hike to a fight in earnest.

As a consequence, the First Battalion was then given definite orders to attack through the line, relieve the pressure on the Second Battalion from the south, and then seize its original terrain objective. To implement these instructions the Battalion Commander decided to lead out with B Company, then in column to the rear. Calling forward its Company Commander and one platoon leader, he explained the situation and gave orders as follows: I want "B" Company to enter the line through the gap created by the Second Battalion and attack to the south to take the pressure off that battalion. Your specific objectives are these two pillboxes ("A" and "B" on Map "C") Knock them out, then change

direction to the southwest and drive to the Wilsam Brook, clearing out any other installations in your path.

To assist your lead platoon, I am going to attach a section of machine guns to it. Use those guns to fire on apertures. I also want you to take this interpreter and have him talk to the occupants of any box you may surround into surrender. K

"C" Company will enlarge the gap made by the Second Battalion by turning on the shoulder of the Siegfried Line and attack south along the Wilsam Brook, clearing out all installations as it goes. "C" Company will contact you on the Wilsam Brook at this pillbox. (Pillbox "C" Map "C") "A" Company will follow you until you turn to the Wilsam Brook, at that point it will take up your old direction of assault and will make a limited attack to the east.

With these orders Company B and its new attachments stepped out of the battalion column and began to march forward to its objective, the third platoon leading, followed by the first provisional mortar platoon and second platoon respectively.

THE COMPANY ATTACK

While his third platoon moved out in the attack, 1st Lieutenant John W. Randles, able commander of Company B, making decisions where he stood, seized upon the following scheme of action. He would push the third platoon as far as it could go on the circuit just outlined by the battalion commander, and, if necessary, he would reinforce its actions with the second platoon which he held out as his support element. The first platoon would protect the company's open left flank after the turn to the Wilsam Brook had been made. He, himself, would keep well forward, observing the action of his leading third platoon, and be prepared to direct the employment of his mortar and support elements. K

From this point until the Wilsam Brook was reached the action of Company B was developed primarily from the efforts of the third platoon, and, for this reason, its actions are detailed somewhat in the next few paragraphs.

(31) Personal knowledge.

The third platoon moved on to the Siegfried Line and passed through the two bunkers which had been reduced by the Second Battalion. In this area signs of a recent violent fight remained. Dead Germans were spread everywhere, and interspersed among the enemy dead were a few American bodies. Sporadic mortar and artillery fire was interdicting the area. To prevent casualties and prepare itself for the assault, the platoon was organized into sort of a dispersed column. Thousands of personnel mines had been sown in the vicinity and initially the troopers were forced to move in a single file. The heavy snow also served to prevent lateral employment of the unit at a time when this deployment was specifically indicated. Although hampering movement, the snow proved to be a silent friend. Alternate melting and freezing had immobilized the firing mechanisms of many mines, with the result that only a very few were ever exploded.

Owing to the denseness of the timber in the area, and the thorough concealment of the German positions it was a certainty that contact with the enemy would come by surprise. The option of opening fire first would be all his.

In order to preserve some freedom of action for his unit, the platoon leader chose two men for scouts and placed them diagonally to his front frankly realizing that they made perfect targets. Both were recent replacements from the Regimental Service Company.

These two men to the front looked like targets and they knew it. They refused to move rapidly and their lieutenant was forced to drive them forward verbally from vantage point to vantage point.

As the platoon moved diagonally forward across the south part of the big ridge just cleared by the Second Battalion a continuous check was made of the route by map. It soon became obvious that the wintry terrain corresponded little with the details of the map. This area had never before been occupied by Allied troops and all charting had been done from aerial photographs. As a consequence each map contained numerous errors. Pillboxes appeared where none were supposed to be and vice-versa. The

maps were so inaccurate, in fact, that it became impossible for units to identify their objective areas. From this point on, all leaders derived bearings from their intuition and sixth senses, an inaccurate procedure indeed. (32) By the end of the day this shortcoming was to limit the advance of the First Battalion on its objective.

The farther the platoon went into the Mertestrott Heights the more inaccurate the maps seemed to become and the more the two lead scouts began to weaken. Each was reluctant to move forward boldly, and the platoon leader was forced to direct them from vantage point to vantage point.

The third platoon was half across a second ridge and had progressed into a forward draw when sweeping rifle fire from a smaller ridge just to the front ⁰drive most of the exposed men to the ground. There was no time to turn and regain the cover behind the ridge just traversed. To do so would have been to get shot in the back. One course only was open. This consisted of a single straight rush at the enemy. The logic was simple. Drive them off the ridge and they wouldn't fire at you.

A short order was yelled by the platoon leader to his men, "Come on, you guys, let's get 'em!" There was no time for troop leading procedures or other control measures. He led off this sudden counter action himself, firing as he ran. Two veteran men went with him. The rest lay where they had hit the ground not moving and not firing.

The three men leading the miniature assault wave gave scant thought to the consequences of their action, automatically realizing that their only possibility of victory lay forward. Each hoped inside himself that others would follow and that the enemy's fire soon would be stopped.

Suddenly from the heights to the left a powerful, sustained burst of fire from an American light machine gun ripped into the German position to the front, enfilading the entire ridge. Both the lieutenant and the two troopers with him recognized the fire as friendly and hit the ground themselves to wait for a lull in the flying bark and armor piercing ricochets. The enemy fire ceased completely. Twisting back, the platoon

(32) Personal knowledge.

leader yelled to his men, "When I stand up, all you guys get up here and help us out!" Individual instructions were also shouted to two of the non coms at the rear to police up the tail of the platoon. The two men who had gone forward with their lieutenant were two of the platoon's three squad leaders. The thing that had sent them forward was the same thing that had made them squad leaders.

The remainder of the men to the rear were a study in contrasts. Two new machine gunners were crawling backwards from their gun assemblies as if they were more afraid of it than they were the enemy. Only one of the scouts was visible. He lay in a trench of snow with a look of unbelieving horror on his face.

At the top of the ridge to the rear appeared two faces of the platoon's veteran sergeants coolly reviewing the situation. Hearing their lieutenant they shifted forward and called to men to get ready to move. Control had been reestablished.

Abruptly the flanking machine gun fire ceased and the platoon leader cautiously got up hoping that the lull was a long one. It was. Long enough for him to yell, "Come on, 504, let's get 'em!" Accompanying shouts and yells rose up and the platoon sprinted forward. About half of it, that is. Many men did not get up until the situation on the top of the hill was proved safe.

As a matter of fact it was so safe that the platoon had to waste few rounds improving it on the few shadowy forms disappearing into the trees to the front. On the position itself only one German moved. He was in a sitting position with his hands in the air screaming for his life. He couldn't get up. One of his legs was a twisted, bleeding shambles.

Every other German on the ridge lay dead, arrayed in a perfect skirmish line, each behind a tree, many with their brains leaking out of their helmets. The machine gun fire had been decisive and accurate. It is not often that such completely effective use can be made of an automatic weapon. This cooperative move prevented the third platoon from receiving a single casualty.

platoon details
Surveying the situation on top of the ridge, the platoon leader decided that he had traversed too far into the line, an estimated one thousand yards, and that he probably had bypassed the first two pill-boxes which were his objectives. (33) First, dressing down the men who had failed to attack, he then turned his unit to the southwest and pushed off again, this time for the Wilsam Brook.

It was providential that he did so. Minutes later succeeding enemy units assaulted the little ridge meeting Company A in motion which was moving to clear its sector. Another fight ensued and this was bloodier for the enemy than the first had been.

In the meanwhile the remainder of Company B preceded by its command party was following the third platoon, staying sufficiently far to the rear to avoid any other fire fights that the third platoon might develop. The first platoon was shifted to the left to guard the third platoon's flank.

The third platoon continued in motion with the same two reluctant scouts forward. Their recent performance did not justify replacing them with better men. Progressing downhill this time, more rapidly than before, the platoon had covered about six hundred yards without finding a pillbox when it began to receive aimed small arms fire from the front. This enemy was more distant than in the previous encounter, and thereby allowed the platoon more cover and time with which to prepare a coordinated attack. The platoon leader called for his platoon sergeant to come forward.

Both scouts had been driven down and would not return the fire even though repeatedly ordered to do so. The platoon leader's efforts to control the scouts merely resulted in an increased rate of the enemy's fire, forcing him to move several times because obviously well-aimed bullets followed him from place to place socking into the ground around him. No fire was being returned at all and the enemy grew bolder.

(33) Personal knowledge.

The two scouts were behind trees from which a lot of bark was flying. They were ordered to withdraw immediately. One was struck in the head before he could do so. The other, when he saw this, lost control of himself and an unreasoning fear took over. He began to scream and stood up behind his tree. He was completely gone and would obey no command, either to get down or to withdraw. He was also too far out in the open for anyone to go after him.

The platoon sergeant ran up with the platoon guide and the interpreter, a trooper, who had formerly been a Czechoslovakian National, and who was now too impatient to remain in the rear.

The firing became more intense and the platoon sergeant cautioned all to get down. At that instant the hysterical scout began to scream louder, "I am hit; I am hit!" These screams galvanized the interpreter into action. He rushed into the open and attempted to aid the scout, crouching beside him with complete disregard for his own safety. This effort was of no avail. The scout died in his arms and, as was later determined, had not a mark on his body, according to the medics who tried to establish a cause of death. (34)

It is honestly believed that this man literally scared himself to death. More likely he believed himself wounded when a piece of flying bark or earth struck him in the face or body.

Seeing he could be of no further assistance the interpreter withdrew with the vital information that he could see a pillbox to the front and enemy on the ground defending it from its rear. Both scouts had been so afraid that they had observed neither it nor the enemy.

With this knowledge a hasty plan of assault was worked out in a matter of seconds. The platoon guide was directed to get a machine gun team on the high ground to the left, firing into any apertures visible on that side of the box. The platoon sergeant was to emplace two more machine guns high on the right flank, deliver overhead fire to the left front and reduce the enemy fire from that direction. None of the three

(34) Personal knowledge.

leaders at this point had much faith in the machine gun teams' ability to carry out these assignments without leading them into action personally. The crews were new men for the most part and had not yet shown much personal aggressiveness. ←

With this dual base of fire beating the enemy down, the platoon leader would take the balance of the platoon and assault in one wave sweeping the high ground to the left and pivoting right to strike across the left rear of the pillbox.

However, this assault went only slightly farther than the planning stage before extensive modifications were necessary. Light 50 millimeter mortar fire had begun to land in the area and the enemy to the left front had added a machine gun to its defensive fires.

The platoon guide could not get his machine gun crew to its feet. They would crawl only a few yards and then hit the ground. Cursing and kicking his men in desperation, he singlehandedly went into action. Swiftly jamming the gun into its tripod he carried it and one box of ammunition up the slope to the left in an effort to complete his mission. Running in the snow he tripped over a log and went sprawling just as a burst of fire swept over his head from a pillbox concealed to his immediate front which no member of the platoon had yet seen.

It was well camouflaged by both moss and snow and had remained silent until this time. Why it had not opened up earlier no one will ever know. Such improbabilities happen often in combat.

Fighting for his life the platoon guide put his machine gun into action while on his knees, returning the enemy fire from the aperture and silencing it. On looking him over later, he had bullet holes in the sleeves and shirt of his combat jacket but was not wounded anywhere.

In the meantime few troopers appeared available for the assault. Hardly anyone was visible. Those that were consisted of about a half a squad; and, because of the blistering enemy fire, could not be induced to move as a group. The platoon assault was beginning to peter out like a wet fuse.

The Company Commander, seeing the platoon's predicament, began to prepare to use his mortars and support platoon to swing the balance again in favor of the attack. However, his actions had no time to develop. Suddenly, the interpreter could stand it no longer. He began to rush straight to the pillbox, which he had initially located, spraying fire with his Thompson sub-machine gun as he went.

The platoon leader seeing this action yelled for his men to follow him and swung wider to the left against the enemy fire from ahead, shooting as he went. The platoon assault was on with two men and a volley of yells. This small thrust momentarily caused the Germans to reduce their fire. Several other troopers began to move forward. The impasse was broken and the platoon began to get into action. A group of men came up carrying panzerfausts. One of the light machine guns from the rear began to fire into the tops of the trees in the direction in which the platoon leader had gone. There wasn't much chance of this gun's hitting anybody, but its fire combined with the riflemen now in action was effective firepower, for field-gray clad soldiers could be seen abandoning their positions and fleeing through the trees.

Suddenly from an open concrete fire pit just to the left of the pillbox, which the interpreter had located and attacked, a group of trapped Volksgrenadiers led by a parachute captain rushed from behind each side of a concrete apron. Somebody let a 155 mm panzerfaust go perfectly in their midst, and pieces of German soldiers were splattered in liberal quantities all over the landscape. Those of the enemy who were able surrendered on the spot. (35)

The interpreter, in the meanwhile, almost sprayed his way into the pillbox, which he had rushed all alone, but the Germans who had been out of it defending its rear, shut it in his face as he jumped for the entrance.

Screaming in German he fired a full clip into the outer passage in which he was standing, completely unaware of any danger from his own ricochets. He was unharmed.

(35) Personal knowledge.

Several more panzerfausts were brought up, and security elements were placed to the north and south. In the rear, the platoon sergeant was asking the occupants of the pillbox silenced by the platoon guide to surrender. He was successful shortly thereafter, and a total of four prisoners was taken. One German was dead inside. hit full in the face by the fire which the platoon guide had delivered through the aperture.

The surrender of the bunker which had been assaulted singlehandedly by the interpreter became a cat and mouse game. The two embrasures were blown in with panzerfausts in a hurry, but the Germans inside would not readily surrender, because their officer inside would not permit it.

Several "B" Company men were standing on top of this pillbox when two bazooka rounds were fired at them by "C" Company, which had come from the north. This was a mistake in identification. One round exploded in the center of the group but wounded nobody. Recognition was made through the medium of loud protests voiced by "B" Company.

The pillbox surrendered soon after and swelled the company's total for this single action to twenty-two Germans taken prisoner.

"B" Company then moved out again for the battalion objective on new orders given the company by radio. This time the first platoon took the lead. The third platoon would follow as soon as it was reorganized. No men were spared to guard the recently captured boxes, owing to the company's limited strength. The company commander made this decision, choosing the lesser of two evils. He was well aware of the consequences should the enemy decide to attack and reoccupy them.

The reorganization of the third platoon was carried out under some difficulty as the entire platoon, less its security elements, was engaged in looting the prisoners, and the three installations just taken. It is of interest to notice here that many more men were available for this activity than could be found during the heat of the two platoon attacks made that day. Rations, the one important thing the Germans could have had, were not present. They apparently were being fed from the rear at night.

Advancing rapidly to the battalion objective, "B" Company had travelled some fifteen hundred yards observing enemy movement, but making no real contact, when a halt was called. The company was now astride what appeared to be the objective. All features shown on the map could be located on the ground, including a road, two bordering brooks and a cleared area to the south.

Verification was requested from the battalion headquarters group. However, it was found that "B" Company had moved so rapidly, that the headquarters group had been outdistanced, and that Germans had infiltrated back into the installations between the rifle units and the command group, with the result that there was now no physical contact between the fighting elements and the command elements of the battalion.

(36)

Company B was soon joined by Company C, which had been following, and a lively discussion soon began among the officers present as to whether the objective had or had not been reached. The platoon leader of Company B's first platoon, which had set the rapid pace to the objective, averred that it had not yet been reached. However, he was outvoted, and the battalion rifle units began to organize the ground into a perimeter defense. Company A arrived soon after and a report was radioed back to the battalion command group that the objective had been taken and all units were in position.

As a matter of fact the battalion had failed by some six hundred yards to reach its proper objective. This error, however, gave little tactical advantage to the enemy, for the Second Battalion had successfully cut the Neuhoof Road. Moreover, the First Battalion in its present location could do a fair job of defending the regimental sector from the south. What was serious, as a result of this false report, lay in the fact that a supply-carrying weasel, riskily squeezed through Neuhoof by "B" Company's supply sergeant, was trapped by the enemy, as it searched for the misplaced battalion on the Neuhoof Road. This vehicle

(36) Personal knowledge.

carried a trailer loaded with ammunition and the odds and ends of a few ration boxes scavenged from the 740th Tank Battalion, which supported the Division. (37) Food was beginning to become a real problem. Every man's belly was gnawed by hunger.

Company B went into position on the south flank of the battalion perimeter, and immediately dispatched patrols to its front. These patrols were short lived however. They had gotten no farther than one hundred and twenty five yards when one of the patrols caught a group of Germans in the open between two pillboxes. These they drove inside one of the bunkers and returned with the story that a line of the forts lay to the south.

Little progress was made in the digging of holes on the position. It was not that the men didn't want to dig holes; it was due to the fact that each man was too tired and too weak from hunger to do more than scrape the snow away from the ground. A little rut in the ground was to be his abode for the night.

As the last of daylight was fading, the northern half of the company was plastered with salvo after salvo of 155 artillery fire, which burst continuously in tree tops. Undoubtedly this fire was being called for by the occupants of the pillboxes earlier contacted by "B" Company's patrols. Several men were wounded in this initial barrage, one man losing most of his lower legs and receiving other wounds seconds later even while others were bent closely over him. This shook the morale of some, for the wounded man was one of the legendary heroes of the unit.

This fire was to last incessantly all night, perhaps because the enemy had few other targets. The volume of fire was so heavy that when the dawn arrived, the forest which Company B had occupied the night before was now only an open clearing of slashed and jagged stumps. There was a continuous shower of branches and tree limbs all night long. Wounded were evacuated by strong patrols which made contact with the enemy both coming and going.

(37) Personal knowledge.

That night the temperature dropped considerably and the wet clothing of the men froze on their bodies. There was no warmth of any kind. Blankets, shelter halves, and raincoats had all been left in the assembly area. Many men slept with their arms around each other trying to keep warm. Company officers were to endure all night the moaning of their men who were fighting the cold.,

The next day brought apt testimony of the price that the past day's operation had wrought. The labor of traversing areas without coats in blinding snow storms, through waist deep drifts, in sub-zero temperatures without rest, shelter or food took its inevitable toll. Men's feet were beginning to bleed and ooze fluid from the alternate freezing and friction of halts and marches. Both the feet and hands of many were beginning to turn the blue-black of frostbite, or trenchfoot, as it may be called. Some of the more serious cases were questioned and asked to return to the rear. This they refused to do, claiming that they were good for at least a few days more. Some men had removed their boots and found that they could not put them back on again. They wrapped their feet in parts of enemy uniforms asking that they not be evacuated.

Feet went bad despite the highest type of discipline. All troops had been well briefed on the evils of trenchfoot and kept their feet in the best condition they knew how. One of the surgeons recommended rubbing the feet with Barbasol Brushless shaving cream. The efficiency of this method may be questioned, but every man carried a tube whether he liked it or not.

During the night the enemy infantry had not been idle. He had fully developed the battalion's position, and with daylight he launched heavy coordinated counterattacks, preceded by masses of artillery fire against A and C Companies principally. These were repelled only after severe fighting. (38)

Company B was struck by a flanking unit of about a platoon in size, and this attack was quickly repelled, mainly by the actions of one of the

(38) Personal knowledge.

attached machine gun crews. Their reward for their performance was to be blasted completely to pieces by a well arched panzerfaust, which fell exactly in their hole.

This eventuality was the key that ended the enemy effort against Company B, however. The first platoon fired two panzerfausts back from where the first had come, with the result that all fire and other evidences of enemy activity in this area evaporated completely.

Artillery fire began to fall in the area with negligible results. Still some few men began to show concern for their personal safety. The company's prize "goldbrick" developed a suspicious limp, claiming that he had been struck in the ankle bone, and that he couldn't walk. A heart-to-heart talk by one of the company officers straightened him out. Another of the company officers was hit and refused to evacuate himself. The medic who treated him, a veteran with over three hundred day's combat, lost his nerve and went AWOL to the rear, never to return to the outfit. Little things, these, but the strain and physical deterioration were becoming noticeable in Company B.

Another patrol was put out by the company to its front in order to determine whether or not the pillboxes were occupied. The officer who was wounded led this one out. The Germans were still there and during the night had dug positions to the rear of the concrete fortifications to defend against Company B, back up on the hill. Strangely none of these were occupied, although Germans could be heard moving about inside.

While returning, the patrol was fired at by an American light machine gun and one rifle from the north. The patrol immediately took cover and cautiously determined that the firers were American parachutists,- more than likely from the 508th Parachute Infantry. The patrol could not move back up the hill without exposing itself; neither could it identify itself either by calls or by a helmet held upon a stick. The helmet signal only drew additional bursts of fire.

From the top of the hill however, one of B Company's platoon sergeants came forward with a small group of men believing that the patrol had gotten into a jam with the enemy. Quickly sizing up the

situation, he called off the encounter with the 508, who indeed it was. An entire platoon came up, followed by other units in the rear.

The Germans in the meanwhile came to life in the pillboxes, where they should not have been, ~~and~~ in order to conduct a proper defense, ~~and~~ began to fire one gun from the nearest box. This gun could not be traversed to cover the 508, and it was but a matter of minutes before its operators were forced to surrender. This was accomplished by an effective piece of coordination between the two friendly elements. The B Company group fired on the two installations to the front, paying specific attention to any support which the enemy might choose to bring into play from the east, while the platoon from the 508 attacked each box in turn. The Germans in both boxes quickly gave up as a result of this move and no casualties were sustained on either side. (39)

Back at the Regimental C. P. however, the situation was not as peaceful. The failure of the battalion to secure its objective the day before was a sin of the worst sort, and much commotion was caused thereby. A platoon of tanks seeking the First Battalion had made a dangerous four thousand yard sweep into enemy lines looking for the wayward battalion in vain, but had luckily escaped intact. The battalion ammunition resupply had been lost there also in the unfortunate weasel incident. Throughout its colorful history, the 504 had excused many understandable shortcomings in its subordinate units, but failure to deliver the results called for on the field of battle had not been one of them. In one way or another the unit had always accomplished its mission, and from the moral standpoint, it was also going to accomplish this one. A wide gap existed between the First and Second Battalions, and because of the unremitting German counterattacks, it was essential that the First Battalion's position be improved. (40)

Having had the major portion of its front pinched out by the 508th, Company B was free to be used for this purpose. It constituted the only unit in the entire regiment that could be spared. The Third Battalion was completely employed in mopping up the defenses between Neuhoef and the

(39) Personal knowledge; (40) A-9, p. 106, 249.

Jagerhauschen Farm. Both ²²A and C Companies were desperately resisting well supported counterattacks from the south and could not possibly be disengaged. They were to be under constant pressure for the next thirty six hours.

It was now apparent that there were two kinds of enemy in this sector. Poorly organized fortress units,- whose resistance varied inversely as the proximity of their officers,- manned the indefensible pillboxes, and better outfitted Wermacht troops comprised the counter-attacking units with which the First and Second Battalions had been embroiled since yesterday. In cracking the Siegfried, the troopers had actually run head on into an estimated reinforced regiment which was moving to meet the 325th Glider Infantry's threat at Neuhof. If the 504 could hold as it had been against this more able-bodied threat, its mission would be fully accomplished. (41)

not correct

Company B was then ordered to withdraw deep into the regimental area, swing through the Second Battalion and attack south along the Frauenkron Road to the edge of the Forst Gerolstein. It was now hoped that this movement would outflank the assaulting enemy now being beaten off by A and C Companies. Returning, the company waded through the bodies of Germans who littered most of the regimental zone of action. The enemy's move to reinforce Neuhof had up to this point failed entirely. Tracing its route by following wire lines, tied in one instance around the upthrust frozen arm of a dead German, the company passed through the Second Battalion. There the Second Battalion Supply Officer, a provider of no mean ability, issued every third or fourth man a single "K" ration unit, the first food in the hands of the company in over three days. Men ate ravenously and even the infamous "corned pork load with apple flakes" portion of the ration tasted good.

At this junction one platoon of tanks from the 740th Tank Battalion was assigned to the company. These vehicles were placed with some in the center of the first platoon, and some following in support. The first platoon led out for B Company and had gone twenty five hundred yards to (41) Personal knowledge.

turn a bend in the Neuhoof Road, where hell's roof literally fell in on the unit. The platoon had gotten well into the open when it was struck from three directions by criscrossing bands of machine gun, twenty millimeter flak, mortar, tank, artillery and rifle fire. In the space of seconds the platoon was almost annihilated. Out of twenty-one men only two escaped, all others being either killed or wounded. Both escapees had fragment holes in their clothing. Many men never knew what hit them. Two troopers were blown completely to pieces, leaving no remains with which to identify them. The tanks immediately began to return the fire, withdrawing rapidly as they did so. The enemy fire ceased. (42) He had scored well in what was almost an ambush. He had been clever; and no doubt, thoroughly prepared by the movement of the vehicles up the road on the preceding day. The narrow confines of the route, and the deep snow in the surrounding woods had left little choice for the platoon to employ itself in any other way than in column and this was the disastrous result.

not on map

The company treated its wounded while the company commander tried to call off further efforts forward. Two platoons remained. One consisted of twelve men including five attached machine gunners; the other platoon had eleven. Company strength numbered about thirty including the skeletonized mortar unit.

Artillery fire began to fall a round at a time in the area. One of the aid men became hysterical. An officer talking in reasoned sentences brought him under control. The company commander argued again and again with his battalion commander that he could not succeed if he were required to continue the attack. There was no route to employ the tanks where they could be supported by infantry. The troopers who heard him knew that too, and their knees shook with something else beside cold. Yet most of the junior leaders were ready, and if the order were given, they would go. They began to reconnoiter the ground to the flanks.

(42) Personal knowledge.

There was one leader who would not go, however. A highly decorated replacement officer who had served formerly with another infantry division stayed only long enough to hear the battalion commander on the 300 radio change his plan and order the company to defend in its present position. Deserting his platoon he returned to the safety of a pillbox to the rear. He no longer had the courage required to lead his men. (43)

The company went into position that night, repelled enemy patrols and a counterattack, which at one time enveloped its two flanks. This attack did not succeed because of the excellent sound powered telephone outpost system, which fully alerted all members, and the inability of the Germans to withstand the close range fire of the tanks. During this enemy effort thousands of rounds of ammunition were fired. The area was so lit up from tracers that a man could have read a newspaper by their light had he been so inclined.

That night the enemy could be heard moving up tracked vehicles. This was reported, and two tank destroyers were sent forward to join the company. Because of the open tops of the vehicles, and the time fire, and tree bursts which the enemy was throwing in, the crews spent more time under their tanks than they did in them. The narrow road caused a difficult problem in the dispersing of vehicles in a defensive array, but this was accomplished after much difficulty. (44)

Early on the morning of the fourth, the enemy poured four distinct calibers of fire on Company B, including flat trajectory fire. None of these weapons could be located except through the medium of shell bursts. They were too well concealed.

Slowly Company B was getting another forest shot down over its head. Heavy tree trunks were being sheared off like grass stalks. One man was pinned in his hole by the sixteen inch bole of a falling tree. A tree burst killed two occupants of a tank destroyer. It was as safe standing in the open as to remain in holes. Men, unable to find room under a tank, became resigned to the fact that they were going to be hit and their sense

(43) (44) Personal knowledge.

of self preservation began to disappear. One man working, fully exposed, kept trying to repair a telephone line that was continuously being shot out. Farther away from him one of the platoon leaders stood out in full view of everybody, moving from shell crater to shell crater as they occurred, writing down data for shell reports. Another man carelessly picked up a hot fuse that had not been completely destroyed and burnt himself with it. (45)

The members of Company B had been too long in contact with the enemy for their own good. The combined physical and mental strain was beginning to show its effect. However, they hung on against artillery fire that began again and again during the day and against an enemy that never came, carrying out their wounded, manning armored weapons, and adjusting long awaited friendly artillery concentrations for the supporters who had come up, but who could not stomach the fire and ^{who} would not remain forward with them.

That night the company was relieved twenty four hours late by elements of the 99th Division who many times lost their way coming up from the rear over the complex terrain. In a sense this eased the guilty spirits of the troubled organization which had had so much difficulty accomplishing its task in the Mertestrott Heights.

Finally, it is of interest to note that the First Army decided to withdraw the XVIII Airborne Corps from this sector, because of the tortuous ground in the area, and the superior tactical qualities of the lowland regions which lay far to the north, and which also provided a better avenue to the Rhine.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

While it may be of some value to review this action purely from the point of view of the tactical principles which were involved, a short space only will be spent in their discussion. It is not believed that a lengthy study in this direction will produce anything which is not already a matter of sound military doctrine. What is considered to be of

(45) Personal knowledge.

real significance in the operation concerns the conduct and reactions of the individual members of Company B to the conditions of battle.

Treating the tactical action briefly, it may be said that, in general, successful measures were employed throughout the operation, and that Company B's mission was accomplished in fact, if not in exact detail. At the end of the period it was about where it was supposed to be. The enemy had been prevented from reinforcing Neuhoef and that was all that was desired. Some understandable errors were made, such as the decision to stop on the wrong objective. This was not unusual. Similar confusions and misdirections must be expected by all commanders employing troops in dense and difficult terrain. In this case Company B's effort was further complicated by the inaccuracies of the maps and the action of the enemy which cut off the guiding hand of the battalion command group to the rear.

And therein lies another principle: that a commander must remain well forward in the attack, while operating in close terrain; for only by doing so may he be in a position to direct and influence the outcome of the actions of his unit. This was brought out during the attack on the pillboxes near the Wilsam Brook which stalled for a short time. "B" Company's commander, overseeing the action as he was, would have been able to bring rapidly his mortars into play or reinforce his third platoon with his support platoon had it been necessary. The company's initiative of the attack was never in doubt here as a consequence.

Also the operation cannot be called extraordinary because it was made against the famous Siegfried Line. Suffice it to say that the invincibility of its forts was a great myth, and that it took no special measures to reduce it that might not have been ordinarily used to attack any other type of prepared position located in dense terrain. In the cases where the Germans failed to dig trenches to the rear, and instead decided to defend from within the bunkers, the attack might even have been made easier as a result. The only real difficulty encountered came from the enemy's deployed infantry and artillery, both located outside

the concrete fortifications. The defender was more effective when he retained his mobility and the consequent initiative of the counterattack. He was less effective when he tied himself to his bunkers, thus losing flexibility. It is worthy of mention, however, that the lack of supporting American artillery somewhat assisted his defense.

To return to the central theme of this operation, the events which may be profitably criticized concerned the human element. Here is where the most noticeable shortcomings and weaknesses occurred, if it may be considered that really good soldiers have weaknesses.

It must be remembered, first of all, that the members of Company B were, for the most part, veteran troops who had proved their exceptional bravery time and time again, against the enemy. Furthermore, they were picked volunteers whose very training, eliminating in nature, had run out most of the cowards before combat was ever reached. Finally their morale here, as always, was uncommonly high. Yet on many occasions men did not fire, get up, or participate in the action. Each time an assault was made, the same few individuals always made it. For the most part, a rifle platoon had actually consisted of a three or four man force whose other remaining members seemed to be around principally for rations and casualties. This inability of the platoon to function in a coordinated effort to produce its maximum effectiveness against the enemy was perhaps the most striking feature of the operation of Company B. To what was it due?

Initially it must be emphasized that this division of the unit into those who would go and those who wouldn't was no novel situation by any means. It was, in fact, an old story to the veteran leaders of the company who had, time and time again, borne the load of attack.

To these leaders the problem was not one of leadership failure. In the action at the pillboxes it was true that the platoon leader cited did go forward without his platoon each time. However, he was forced to do so by the reluctance of some of his men to move continuously toward the enemy when ordered. The only thing that produced sustained movement was his example of moving in the lead of his men.

It is given as a fundamental fact that the discipline of the American soldier is such that he must know that it can be done before he will do it. There is traditionally little blind obedience in the American Army. The junior officer or noncommissioned officer must expect to lead the way personally whenever intense resistance slows his men in the execution of his orders to attack.

Also the leader cannot long afford to wait until he gets every man on his feet moving forward. To do so would undoubtedly be to wait forever. It is elementary that the sooner the enemy can be silenced, the shorter time the leader and his unit will be under fire and the fewer the casualties that will be taken. Units in contact with the enemy must move, or die in the fire that will soon be carefully adjusted and directed upon them.

The small unit commander therefore, may not delay longer to move on the enemy's position than it will take for him to make an intelligent estimate of the situation, and employ those elements of his organization which he can quickly reach.

If the problem was not then one of timidity, morale, or leadership, where does the real reason lie for the failure of some men of the company to participate in the assault?

Individuality of courage may be a reason, but it was the unanimous belief of the officers of the company that the BASIC TRAINING received before combat did not properly fit the individual for battle. Primarily the American soldier had not been taught to kill or to function under the pressure of real combat when it came.

It is to be noted that several of the newer replacements, when put in a position where for their immediate salvation they had to operate their weapons and return fire to the enemy, did not have the instinct to do so. They were actually helpless ineffectives at the most critical time of their lives.

This was not an unusual occurrence but was typical of the majority of Company B's replacements. It was the universal case that many were

absolutely bewildered in their initial baptism of fire and continued to remain so until each had learned through time spent in combat under the supervision of his leaders to destroy the enemy before he himself was destroyed.

Just one feature of the infantry system of training is criticized herein. This is, specifically, the lack of offensive indoctrination in present standard schedules. In other respects these schedules were believed to be satisfactory. Company B's newer men were at this time generally well versed in such fundamental subjects as censorship, personal hygiene, scouting and patrolling and parachute techniques. It was only in the art of firing at and closing with the enemy that the new man was seriously deficient. The new soldier of Company B did not have the instinctive ability to react under conditions of stress that an objective spirit would have given him.

Three errors of training infantrymen were reiterated by this action. They are: (1) Insufficient body contact sports which build aggressive, assault instincts (2) The over-regulated range practice so dear to the heart of the rifle expert (3) The lack of battle realism in all assault training.

An examination of any wartime infantry training program for the individual rifleman will bear this out. The time actually spent, during which the soldier was actually required to employ himself and his weapon offensively and objectively toward a simulated enemy was practically zero. Too much of his training was passive, too much of it was overcontrolled and over-directed.

It is considered by way of illustration that the battle indoctrination course taught more caution than it did aggressiveness, that the artificial rifle range practice created a hesitancy in riflemen to fire at anything which was not a raised target in a frame, and that too little of all training given, combined both of the above phases into such a program as would simulate the conditions of actual combat.

A second important aspect of this operation lay in the almost complete physical deterioration of each individual member of the company. Looking at this operation in a certain light it might be considered less of a battle than it was a progressive ruination of the organization.

Company B's operational efficiency at the end of this period was practically reduced to nothing. To a certain extent it could defend in place. There was no possibility that it could have made another assault. Many men were so weakened when finally relieved that they could not walk back to the assembly area without assistance. Almost all extremities had been frozen. Many feet were mushy on the bottom, oozing fluid or blood. Dysentery afflicted sixty percent of the unit and some men were actually hospitalized after the action from the combined effects of this and malnutrition.

The results of this physical deterioration as well as the many battle casualties taken, limited the capabilities of B Company for many weeks thereafter. Quite a number of men failed to regain their physical efficiency until after the end of the war. Many others were permanently lost to the unit because of bad feet and hands. These effects were far reaching and would have cut Company B's fighting power considerably should it have been called, for an early airborne mission.

Warfare today dictates the skillful employment of machines and heavy materiel. An airborne unit being equipped with only light weapons and insufficient transport makes up what it can of this deficiency in its legendary elan and endurance.

Employed properly to the enemy's heart and rear where it does not have to meet a prepared and entrenched foe these fighting qualities may be capitalized upon to their fullest extent.

To employ airborne troops where they may be ground down physically in a series of indecisive and unremunerative frontal attacks may well prove to be a senseless waste of such strategic units.

Like armored troops airborne units must be employed where they may decisively influence action. Like armored troops, also, when expended they are difficult to replace.

No attempt is made here to criticize the decisions that were made at higher levels to employ the 82nd Airborne Division in this campaign. Undoubtedly these decisions were justified. Furthermore, criticism, if it were made from the level of B Company, would be so narrow and biased as to be ridiculous.

What it is desired to point out is that it was many weeks before Company B regained the conditioning it needed to participate effectively in an airborne operation. It is also desired to point out that if airborne units are expended in situations where other, more suitably organized units may well be used, it must be realized by the commander so employing them that he is trading on the physical stamina of these troops, the dissipation of which may lose for him the ability to take early decisive action elsewhere.

LESSONS

Some lessons learned from this operation are:

1. Realistic, close combat training must comprise the major single portion of the basic training of the infantry rifleman if he is to be made an offensive minded soldier.
2. Firepower and aggressive action are the deciding factors in small unit actions.
3. The small unit leader has no more vital task in combat than to lead his men in such fashion that the greatest number of them are employed against the enemy.
4. In small units, leadership by personal example is often more important than leadership by other techniques.
5. Fixed fortifications are only an augmentation of infantry's ability to hold ground, and are no more effective a barrier than the ability of that infantry to support them by conventional defensive action.
6. Operations conducted in winter weather must be of short duration and should insure that objectives are taken quickly, that supply and

shelter may be provided and the rapid deterioration of the assaulting force thereby prevented.

7. Airborne units because of their limited staying power should not be employed in continuous ground combat for long periods.

8. In close, wooded terrain the advantage will often go to the more aggressive and determined force.

9. Troops operating in cold weather require an increased daily ration supply.

10. In the reduction of fixed fortifications every captured installation must be garrisoned by the attacker to prevent subsequent infiltration and reoccupation by the enemy.

11. In dense, tortuous terrain there is no such thing as command by "remote control". Leaders must remain forward with their troops where they may take prompt steps to influence their earlier decisions and the eventual outcome of the action.